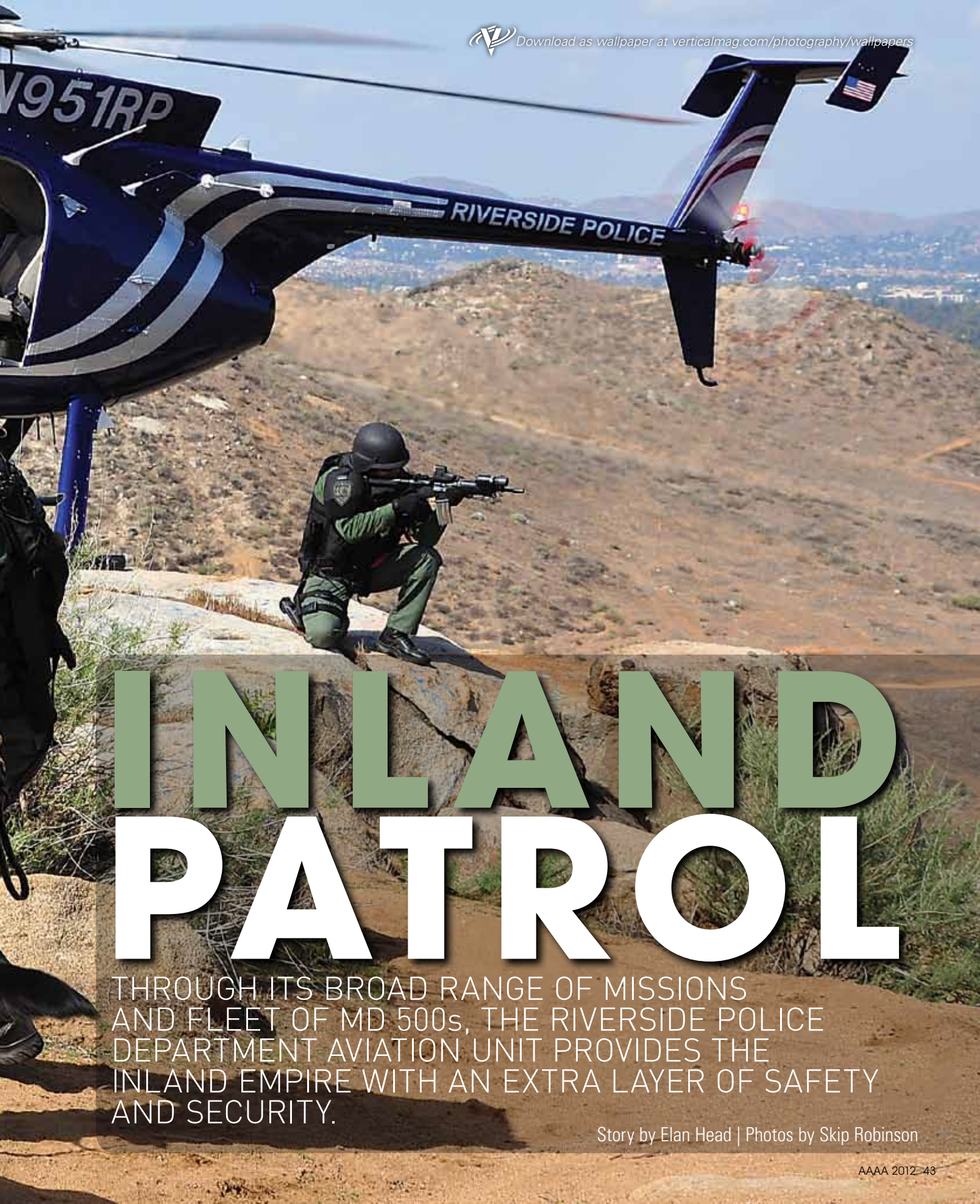


In addition to its patrol duties, the Riverside Police Department Aviation Unit assists special divisions within the department.





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INLAND PATROL

THROUGH ITS BROAD RANGE OF MISSIONS AND FLEET OF MD 500s, THE RIVERSIDE POLICE DEPARTMENT AVIATION UNIT PROVIDES THE INLAND EMPIRE WITH AN EXTRA LAYER OF SAFETY AND SECURITY.

Story by Elan Head | Photos by Skip Robinson

In the world of Southern California law enforcement aviation, Los Angeles and San Diego cast a long shadow. So much airborne law enforcement (ALE) activity takes place in these coastal metropolitan areas that it's easy to overlook Southern California's numerous other ALE programs, many of which are outstanding in their own right.

One such program is the Riverside Police Department Aviation Unit, which serves the city of Riverside, Calif., 60 miles east of L.A., in the heart of the region known as the "Inland Empire." With a fleet of four MD 500s, a 40-plus-year history, and an impressive range of missions and capabilities, Riverside PD is an excellent example of what a mid-sized ALE unit can achieve with dedication and community support. And, while the Riverside PD Aviation Unit may not be the first ALE unit you think of when you hear "Southern California," the citizens of Riverside can't imagine their city without it.

"The helicopter has really been a part of the community now for going on the second generation," said Riverside PD instructor pilot Dave Mullins, emphasizing the importance of community relationships in the unit's longevity and success. "It's been part of the community for so long, it's almost like the fire station on the corner."

A PROUD TRADITION

While the Riverside PD Aviation Unit's helicopters may play a prominent role in the community, its facility on the north side of Riverside Municipal Airport presents a nondescript appearance to passers-by. Walk indoors, however, and you immediately get a sense of how much the city values its police helicopters. With ample office space, a climate-controlled hangar and a 12,000-gallon fuel tank on site, it's clear the Aviation Unit is no temporary operation.

Indeed, the Riverside PD Aviation Unit has been in business for more than four decades, having started operations in 1971 with a single Bell 47G-5 and three pilots who had previously flown for the Los Angeles and Long Beach police departments. In 1980 and 1981, the unit moved into turbine-engined Hughes (later MD) 500s, a type it has stuck with ever since. Today, it operates two MD 500E models and an MD 500D for patrol, training and other missions, plus another MD 500E dedicated to surveillance. It has seven full-time pilots, who came up through the Riverside PD, and who double as observers. Between them, according to need and budget constraints, they fly between 2,000 and 3,000 hours a year.

Like most municipal ALE units, the Riverside unit's pri-



The Riverside Police Aviation Unit currently operates three MD 500Es and one MD 500D. The unit took delivery of a Eurocopter AS350 B2 in 2010, but made the decision to sell it and stick with a single-type fleet due to declining budgets. However, the unit wouldn't mind a larger platform in the future.



The unit has seven full-time pilots, who also double as observers.



Nighttime missions are common for the unit, and it hopes to adopt night vision goggles in the near future.

mary duty is patrol: providing support and cover to police officers on the ground. "Our No. 1 priority is to assist the patrol guys in what they need," said Mullins. And, like other police departments, Riverside PD has reaped enormous benefits from having eyes in the sky: "Several times a week the helicopter is involved in a major incident with a positive outcome," Mullins continued.

These benefits are particularly obvious during vehicle pursuits. New pilot Jeffrey Ratkovich, who worked as a relief observer for three years before being selected for pilot training, recalled one memorable nighttime motorcycle pursuit in which an Aviation Unit crew ended the dangerous chase using only their searchlight (a Spectrolab Nightsun). "They lit up the motorcycle with the Nightsun, and as soon as they lit him up, he pulled over and stopped. It's things like that, that really prove the value of the helicopter."

While the Riverside County Sheriff's Department also operates an aviation unit, Riverside PD currently has the only municipal ALE unit in the densely populated northwest corner of Riverside County (which has a combined population of over two million). So, the Riverside PD Aviation Unit will provide mutual aid to other municipalities as required. A special case is the neighboring city of Corona: when that city's police department dissolved its ALE unit in 2009, Riverside agreed to include Corona in its daily patrol flights in exchange for some of Corona's mission equipment. However, calls in Riverside will always take priority over surrounding areas.

Beyond its bread-and-butter patrol flights, the Riverside PD Aviation Unit tackles an impressive range of law enforcement and public safety missions, further establishing its value to the department and the community. The unit works closely with SWAT (special weapons and tactics) teams on mission pre-planning, insertions and extractions. It conducts aerial photography missions and pipeline patrols. It also routinely assists the Riverside Fire Department and California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection with



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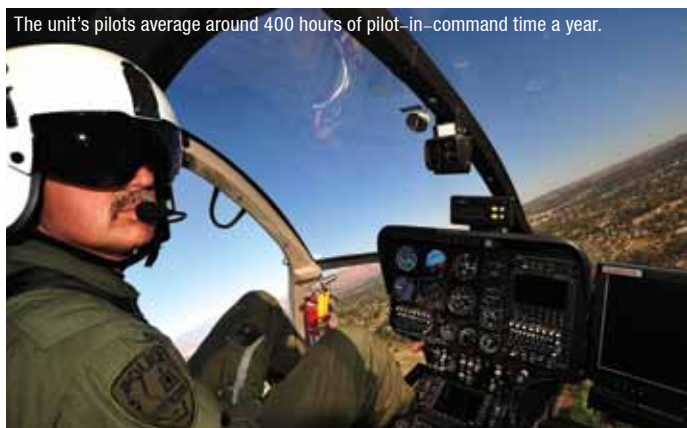


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Although Riverside's helicopters are not certified for instrument flight, all of its pilots are instrument-rated.



The unit's pilots average around 400 hours of pilot-in-command time a year.

In addition to its police mission, the unit supports the Riverside Fire Department and conducts water drops on non-structure fires within city limits.



fire spotting, surveying and even fire suppression, using its MD 500D for aerial application of water on brush and urban interface fires. The unit also assists in searches for missing persons, whether hikers lost in the surrounding parks and national forests, or children lost in city neighborhoods. (Of the latter missions, Ratkovich noted, "We've actually been quite successful. . . . I've been on at least two [cases] where we've located the child. Those are, for us, really satisfying.")

The unit's dedicated surveillance helicopter, meanwhile, works closely with the Inland CrackDown Allied Task Force (INCA), an interagency taskforce organized under the California Department of Justice to combat cocaine cartels and money laundering within the Inland Empire region, with heroin and marijuana interdiction as a secondary mission. The unit joined the taskforce in 1993, and it has been a win-win partnership ever since: its resources have helped INCA become enormously successful, which in turn

has yielded seizure money to assist the Riverside PD with aircraft and equipment acquisitions. "They've provided us with a much-needed influx of cash," said Mullins. "It's been a really good relationship."

SAFETY THROUGH TRAINING

Not counting a helicopter that was shot down in 1994, the Riverside Police Aviation Unit has had only one major accident (a non-fatal one) in its 40-plus-year history — the accident happened during a swiftwater rescue in 1980. The unit has flown 75,000 hours since then, with no severe, or in the military terminology common to many of its pilots, "Class A," mishaps.

Preserving that safety record is a priority for the unit, and consequently training is, too. "We really put an emphasis on training pilots," said Mullins. "It's a very high-trust, low-control environment we're sending them into."

Most law enforcement aviation units want their pilots to

Shown here is Riverside's current fleet of MD 500s. The unit started operations with a Bell 47.



have patrol officer experience, and Riverside is no exception: prospective pilots must have at least three years of patrol experience with the Riverside Police Department before being eligible for pilot training. Said Mullins, "We really look for guys that have a pilot mindset, but also have proven themselves as police [officers]."

To help identify promising candidates, the unit has a part-time relief observer program, which introduces patrol officers to the tactical flight officer side of its pilots' duties (by using pilots as observers rather than dedicated TFOs, the unit can maintain a smaller, more versatile staff.) Thus, in addition to serving as a selection mechanism, the program gives future pilots valuable skills. "You learn that side of the cockpit, so when you're selected as a pilot trainee you can focus on the flying," said Ratkovich.

Riverside PD does its pilot training in-house. Uniquely for a law enforcement organization, it requires pilots to obtain an instrument rating in addition to a U.S. Federal Aviation Administration commercial pilot certificate. Said Mullins, "Very few police departments require the instrument rating. We don't fly in IMC [instrument meteorological conditions] . . . it's the skills that come with that rating that are important. All in all, I think it makes us much better pilots." For example, the comfort level that an instrument-rated pilot has with air traffic control makes it easier to fly surveillance missions at 7,000 to 8,000 feet, an altitude where airplanes are more common than helicopters. "We can send our brand-new pilots out there and they're comfortable in that world," said Mullins. This is in keeping with Riverside's general approach to training: "The whole purpose of the program is giving the guys the confidence and skills to go out and do whatever mission is required of them at a relatively low level of experience."

While pilot training is one part of Riverside's safety focus, maintenance is another. "They really put maintenance at the center of things," said director of maintenance Wayne Young, who has been with Riverside PD since 1995, and in law enforcement aviation since 1980. Young is one of two inspection authorization/airframe and powerplant mechanics at the unit; between them, they are able to handle most of the unit's scheduled and unscheduled maintenance (although they outsource engine and component overhauls, and certain equipment installations).

The unit's facility was constructed in 1995; it includes hangars, office workspace and a 12,000-gallon underground fuel tank.



The unit's helicopters are a familiar sight in the skies above Riverside.



THE UNIT HAS VOLUNTARILY CUT BACK ON FLIGHT TIME OUT OF RESPECT FOR CASH-STRAPPED CITY BUDGETS. EXPLAINED MULLINS, "IF WE'RE BUSY, WE'LL FLY MORE, BUT WE DECIDED AS A UNIT THAT WE WOULD RATHER CONSERVE FLIGHT TIME ON OUR OWN."

Riverside's training program is designed to instill its trainees with the professional pilot mindset, according to instructor pilot Dave Mullins.



Thanks to the Aviation Unit's multiple aircraft and generous parts inventory, it is almost never completely grounded due to maintenance. "We have three patrol helicopters, and that gives us a lot of leeway in scheduling things," said Young. "We're very fortunate."

The aircraft themselves are testament to the care and attention that they receive. None of the unit's four helicopters are new (two date to the 1980s), but all have been refurbished and are in excellent condition. Credit for that goes to the entire unit. "We take care of the pilots, but they take care of, us as well," noted mechanic Matt Pagano. "They make the job easy. They're not out there beating up the helicopter."

PLANNING AHEAD

Of Riverside's seven full-time pilots, five are currently eligible for retirement. Mindful of eventual turnover, the Aviation Unit has decided to train one pilot a year for the next four years to guarantee enough replacements. "We've started a process to get pilots trained up so we have a seamless transition," said Mullins. Upon completion of the training program, new pilots will move into a full-time slot if one is available, or work as a relief pilot until one is.

While the unit is budgeted for 3,000 hours a year, during the current economic downturn the unit has voluntarily cut back on flight time out of respect for cash-strapped city budgets. Explained Mullins, "If we're busy, we'll fly more, but we decided as a unit that we would rather conserve flight time on our own." Recently, the unit has logged around 2,200 hours a year, which has not limited its ability to provide day and night coverage, seven days a week.

That respect for the city's taxpayers is mutual. In 1995, the unit was grounded for budget reasons, but public outcry restored operations in a matter of weeks. "We do a lot of stuff in the community, and we're good about publicizing our successes," said Mullins, also noting strong support for the unit within the department. "We're very thankful for the support we currently have."

Of course, the Aviation Unit wouldn't mind upgrading to newer helicopters when the economy recovers — and possibly to a larger platform. Director of maintenance Young described the MD 500 as "a great law enforcement helicopter for what they need it to do," but voiced the common complaint that, as ALE mission equipment has advanced, "They keep putting more stuff on the helicopters." A larger helicopter type would allow the unit to stay

OPERATIONS PROFILE **RIVERSIDE PD**

Riverside PD is currently the only municipal ALE unit in the densely populated northwest corner of Riverside County, and it stays busy because of it.



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The unit's surveillance aircraft was purchased by the Inland CrackDown Allied Task Force with seized funds and given to the city of Riverside. Fuel and maintenance are paid for by the taskforce.

on mission longer, while carrying additional equipment and passengers. But that possibility is still on the far horizon.

In the meantime, the unit is getting some items on its wish list for its surveillance helicopter: an L-3 Wescam MX-10 high-definition and infrared camera, plus a video downlink system and radio upgrade. The equipment has been funded in part through grant money, with the remainder of the funds coming through INCA.

All in all, Riverside's pilots don't have much to complain about. Outstanding teamwork, diverse missions and strong community support make the Aviation Unit one of Southern California's best places to work for a law enforcement pilot. As pilot Rich Estes summed up, "It's a fun mission. It's the best office in the world as far as I'm concerned."



Elan Head is an FAA Gold Seal flight instructor with helicopter and instrument helicopter ratings.

She holds commercial helicopter licenses in the U.S., Canada and Australia, and is also an award-winning journalist who has written for a diverse array of magazines and newspapers since the late-1990s.

